ELEVEN

TEMPLE OF THE TRUE INNER LIGHT

A DPT Eucharist on the Lower East Side

For several years, a hole-in-the-wall storefront on Manhattan's East Ninth Street hosted the most publicly visible psychedelic sect in North America. The East Village address was the home of the Temple of the True Inner Light, a group that somehow spent the late eighties—the high tide of the War on Drugs—unmolested as they openly promoted the spiritual use of the synthetic, legal entheogen DPT (N,N-dipropyltryptamine) right in the middle of New York City.

Ironically, the Temple's Manhattan location may have been what protected them from serious legal hassles. New York City police had their hands full trying to stem the multibillion-dollar traffic in heroin, cocaine, and other narcotics that flowed through the city's streets, and barely took note of the little sect and the obscure, legal hallucinogen its members used. Perhaps the Big Apple's finest thought it was better to let the temple's adherents trip the light fantastic on the sidewalks of New York's bohemian quarter and concentrate on more dangerous drugs and organizations.

YIPPIE SPIRITUALITY AND THE VOICE OF THE PSYCHEDELIC

Temple founder Alan Birnbaum had promoted entheogenic enlightenment since 1974. That September the *New York Times* reported the twenty-seven-year-old Birnbaum was arrested for distributing joints at a cannabis "smoke-in" in Manhattan's Washington Square Park. The smoke-in had

been organized by the Youth International Party, a.k.a. the Yippies, a New Left radical group that pioneered media pranking and culture jamming and saw cannabis as a revolutionary consciousness-raising agent.

One year later the Yippies featured Birnbaum in their newspaper, the *Yipster Times*. Reporter "Billy Gram" visited a "small, shabby cockroach-infested apartment on the lower east side of Manhattan" to interview Birnbaum about a group he'd organized, "The Church of the Psychedelic Eucharist."

According to the article, "the Church believes consciousness to be the ultimate guide 'in the real world' and that the ultimate consciousness comes from the 'flesh of consciousness': Psychedelics. Some of the members claim to have become so conscious as to have seen and communicated with the Psychedelic spirit itself. They report that it can present itself as a real living spirit within the extremely psychedelicized person."[1]

Birnbaum was also quoted as saying: "The main purpose of the Church is to make God available to the members. . . . Each person has to hear the voice of the Psychedelic themselves and follow it to the best of their ability. In doing this, my friends and I have come up with the same truths and have gotten together and formed this church." The church might have never gone beyond Birnbaum's apartment had it not been for its founder's insistence that their psychedelic sacraments be legally recognized. "It is very important to us to have the Church accepted legally," Birnbaum maintained. "We need to be able to ensure the purity and identity of our sacraments for the safety of our members, which is very hard to do if you are dealing with underground chemicals unless it is peyote or marijuana. . . . This can be very disturbing to someone who has the spirit knocking on the door of their consciousness and they are considering about letting it come in."[2]

THE NATIVE AMERICAN CHURCH OF NEW YORK

Perhaps thinking that he had a better shot at getting a religious-use exemption if he changed the church's name and image, Birnbaum and five followers created the Native American Church of New York in 1976. Despite its name, the organization had no connection with the long-established indigenous sect, save for the fact that it recognized peyote as a

holy sacrament. Yet New York State's Health Commissioner's office issued the church a permit for ceremonial ingestion of the cactus.

Birnbaum then petitioned the Drug Enforcement Agency to grant his group the same exemption to the drug laws that the Feds had given to the better-known Native American Church of North America. Unlike earlier attempts by non–Native American sects to gain exemptions for psychedelics, Birnbaum's petition maintained that the substances weren't merely aids to a spiritual practice, but "objects of worship and considered deities in themselves." Moreover, the proposal didn't limit itself to one favored chemical, but embraced the whole range of entheogens from LSD to cannabis, to peyote, to synthetics. And it specified that manufacturers and distributers of the sacraments would be regulated by registration and other legal strictures, much as the original Native American Church's suppliers were.

Still, the church was no more successful convincing the DEA than its predecessors had been, and the proposal was rejected. But Birnbaum continued to buy peyote buttons from government-licensed vendors, most of whom probably thought his group was a local branch of the national Native American Church. Birnbaum also applied to the N.Y. State Department of Narcotics for a license to distribute peyote. And in 1979 he appealed the DEA's decision in the U.S. District Court of New York, on behalf of the church and the 1,000-odd followers he claimed.

The ruling in the case, *Native American Church of New York v. United States,* was mixed. Judge Milton Pollack dismissed the church's broadbased claims about the religious use of psychedelics in general, citing previous rulings regarding LSD and cannabis in similar cases, and affirming the federal government's interest in controlling drugs. But he also stated that the church could be given an exemption for peyote use if it was determined to be "a bona fide religious organization and would make use of peyote for sacramental purposes and regard the drug as a deity."[3] Birnbaum appealed the ruling on constitutional grounds, but it was denied.

On the state level Birnbaum faced the tough new "Rockefeller drug laws," which limited the N.Y. State Health Commissioner's ability to grant exemptions such as the one given to his church. When state police learned that Birnbaum had purchased 20,000 peyote buttons from various suppliers, and that his legal ability to possess them was in question, they raided

church premises, arrested him, and seized the cacti. Psychedelics expert Peter Stafford reported that the state planned to try Birnbaum on charges that could have gotten him fifteen years to life but apparently the case never made it to court.

EMPATHOGENS: THE TRIP OF THE HEART

Around 1980 Birnbaum turned his attentions to a specific, and largely legal, set of entheogens: the synthetic phenethylamines and tryptamines.

The best known of these compounds, MDA (3,4-Methylenedioxyamphetamine) was first synthesized in 1910. Twenty years later UCLA researcher Gordon Alles discovered its psychoactive properties as part of his work with amphetamines. MDA and its close molecular relative MDMA, also known as Ecstasy or Molly, were found to not only duplicate the psychedelic and numinous effects of the organic entheogens, but also produced distinctive feelings of filial warmth, closeness, and affection in subjects. Because of these "heart-opening" qualities, these chemicals are often called *empathogens.*

Studies found that the chemicals were useful in treating PTSD and other psychopathologies. But as with LSD and other hallucinogens, there was the worrying potential for their abuse as black-market recreational drugs. As a result, the production, possession, and use of MDA, MDMA, and a few other compounds were restricted to approved medical and scientific researchers.

The most famous and influential of these researchers was Alexander "Sasha" Shulgin. A Berkeley, California, native and former research chemist for Dow Chemicals, the well-connected Shulgin possessed a Schedule I license to manufacture and possess all manner of otherwise-illegal drugs in his backyard analytical laboratory. Fascinated by the mindand heart-expanding powers of MDMA, he spent nearly forty years creating hundreds of alphabet-soup phenethylamine and tryptamine compounds and testing them on himself and his friends. Shulgin wrote of his work in *PiHKAL* and *TiHKAL*, two books now considered the definitive works on synthetic entheogens.

"A VERY POWERFUL ANGEL OF THE HOST"

One of the many chemicals Shulgin and his associates brewed and ingested was DPT. This is a molecular relative of the better-known, and illegal, tryptamine DMT that produces an intense short-duration trip into a psychedelic netherworld. In 1980 Alan Birnbaum wrote the DEA to inquire if DPT, and the DMT analogue 5-MeO-DMT, were legal to possess and use under the Controlled Substances Act. The Feds responded that neither were proscribed by the law, but warned him that abuse would lead to their being placed on Schedule I.

Thus informed, Birnbaum founded the Temple of the True Inner Light. Its basic statement of belief identified its mission with the historical avatars of world religions, stating:

> If you do not belong to Christ (our temple), you cannot receive the Salvation of Yahweh, the Psychedelic. They have told us clearly, and many times, that Christ (King Moses, David, Elijah, Jesus, Vishnu, Gautama, Mohammed, Mani, Quetzacoatl) is alive again physically, and that the crucifixion has happened again . . . the mystery has been revealed.
>
> Anyone who enters into Their (the Psychedelic's), Presence without belonging to Christ's Body is an alien and a foreign visitor to Them. We are Their Children and citizens of Their Realm.
>
> Whoever does not belong to Christ, belongs to anti-Christ. As King Jesus said, "whoever is not with me is against (anti) me."
>
> If anyone hears the Holy Spirit, which is Yahweh's, the Psychedelic's, Testimony that we (our temple) are the true Body of Christ, before having joined with us, they can no longer join us in this physical life.[4]

The temple stated that "our Eucharist is Dipropyl Tryptamine [*sic*]—a very powerful Angel of the Host." One member was quoted as saying that "the psychedelic is Christ," and that it "is instructing us at this time to offer communion to the public with DPT."[5] Another member told a reporter that "DPT is one of the angels," and that God's other angels include marijuana, peyote, and LSD. The temple also maintained that many Old and New Testament references to "spirits" in oil, bread, and other substances were

references to psychedelics, and that the sect was carrying on the work of biblical prophets and priests in the modern world.

STOREFRONT TRIPPING AND CANNIBAL SOUP

The temple produced booklets and flyers that described its mission and distributed them at NYC counterculture hotspots. It also opened a storefront church on East Ninth Street in Manhattan to receive visitors and hold worship meetings.

At the temple storefront, members screened potential communicants. If approved, the seeker was invited to a semiprivate session in the temple, where they would smoke DPT-infused raspberry leaves from a hookah, while meditative music and Bible readings were played on a tape recorder (communicants were expected to stay for the entire taped program). The goal, according to psychedelics researcher Thomas Lyttle, was “a particular gnosis and re-examination of inspired literature via DPT,” if not a full acceptance of the chemical as God and Alan Birnbaum as its prophet.

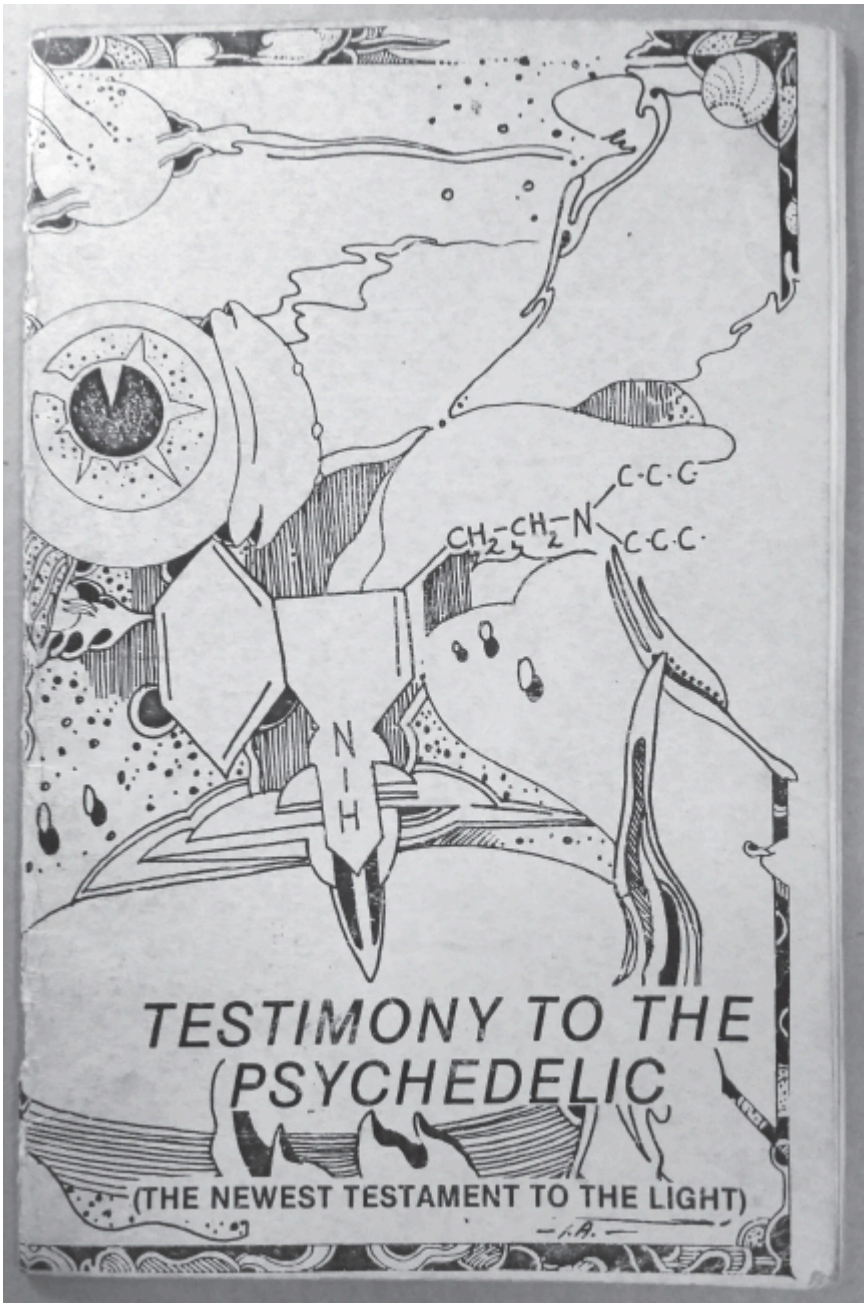

Fig. 11.1. "Testimony to the Psychedelic." The Temple of the True Inner Light distributed booklets and flyers like this around New York City

University of Pennsylvania Libraries' Gotham Book Mart collection, 1981.

Journalist Peter Gorman visited the temple in 1989, and described his experience smoking DPT in the funky, hipster-ghetto storefront church:

> The whole scene is a little shaky; I'm in a New York City tenement, sitting on the floor beneath a loft bed, smoking a bowl of raspberry leaves which are covered in a psychotropic substance I've never heard of, listening to religious scripture with an avowed apostle of the Lord, one who has explained to me that I am a sinner for not accepting Jesus as my savior, and the white smoke as Jesus. It's not the most conducive setting in which to experiment with the stability of my mind. Still, here I am, holding onto that smoke until I know nothing will escape when I open my mouth and gulp a fresh lungful of air.
>
> The high is instant and hard. No warning, no intimation, just swallow and peak. Suddenly, my worries disappear . . .[6]

Another writer described a trip to the temple in the early nineties, where he smoked DPT with the faithful. During the trip he had visions of "melting smiling hobbit/gnome faces" and "bands of nomadic elves with black skin on a moonlight plain cooking meat and preparing for a great hunt."[7] Author Terence McKenna called such entities "machine elves": inhabitants of the phenethylamine- and tryptamine- universes akin to the fairies and "little people" of folkloric traditions across the globe.

One communicant who made himself distinctly unwelcome at the temple was Daniel Rakowitz. A Lower East Side character who had founded his own sect and proclaimed himself the antichrist, Rakowitz was asked to leave the temple after he spent a session ranting crazily at the faithful while waving around a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and a live rooster. Shortly thereafter he made headlines when he was arrested for the murder of topless dancer Monika Beerle, whose corpse he had disposed of by boiling it in a stew and serving it to homeless people in Tompkins Square Park. Rakowitz's cannibal soup-kitchen ministry earned him permanent confinement in a psychiatric ward.

THE SERPENT AND THE SACRAMENT

Many of the temple's teachings touched on gnostic, heterodox-Christian themes. In one, the sect stated the Serpent of Eden had a "mission to open

the eyes of the ‘blind’ . . . Christ was the Serpent, and opening the eyes of the blind to their spiritual nakedness was good.”[8] The passage says that John 3:13 confirms this: “. . . and the Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the Serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal Life in Him.”

Another temple teaching concerns suicide. The passage states, “We have been Shown very clearly by Yahweh, the Psychedelic, the Being of Light, that physical death is not the way to end suffering, and that violence and anger is Condemned. Committing suicide does not end suffering and only leads to Condemnation and rebirth physically. . . . As one person said: ‘If you leave here a tormented soul, you will be a tormented soul over there too.’”[9]

The temple requires a vegan diet of its faithful and sees nutrition as a key element in treating depression. It opposes the use of alcohol, opiates, and cocaine, and promotes nonviolence and honesty. The temple also claims to run a nonprofit organization that sponsors detox programs and builds affordable housing for low-income and homeless people.

The number of temple members and communicants are unknown. However, the sect believes “everyone who ingests Entheogens to be the Children of the true ‘Israel,’” and posits four levels of membership:

> [T]hose who (the outer court):
>
> 1. ingest Entheogens but don’t know that Entheogens are God;
> 2. ingest Them and believe They are God;
> 3. believe Entheogens are God and that our Temple is the true Body of Christ (Buddha, Moses, etc.);
>
> and (the inner court):
>
> 4. those who have given up their life in the world to devote themselves to the Temple.
>
> It is the last group—those who have given up their life in the world to devote themselves to the Temple—that most people would think of as being “Temple members.”[10]

“WE ARE NOT INTO PUBLICITY”

The Temple of the True Inner Light never gained many members. Its ascetic, bibliocentric image and teachings turned off many in the oftenlibertine psychedelic subculture, and rumors that Alan Birnbaum considered himself Christ and dominated his followers like a typical cult guru didn't help. Eventually the temple storefront on East Ninth Street closed—it's now a high-end boutique—and the group retreated to private dwellings.

A visit to the temple's website is almost like a trip back in time to the East Village, storefront-church days of the nineties. It's hosted on the obsolescent Tripod platform and consists of a few pages of text about the temple, and some writings drawn from different faith traditions. Temple webmaster *selah* admits that "we are not into publicity" on the internet—a 1999 flame-war started by a disgruntled ex-member on various psychedelics-related boards may have scared the sect away from interacting with all but the most determined online communicants.

Yet the temple still survives in its discreet, low-key fashion. Over forty years after its founding it is still the most well-known of the synthetics-oriented sects and is a part of both entheogenic and New York counterculture history—a real-life, brick-and-mortar, public psychedelic church that has taken countless people to the parallel universe of the tryptamine experience to see the Light that shines within all humans and that illuminates the spiritual quest of each seeker.